A Perspective on Fostering College Students’ Learner Autonomy in CALL Environment

Jianing Niu
School of Foreign Languages, Dalian JIAOTONG University
joyniu1981@163.com

ABSTRACT: In the context of informatization of higher education and the recent English teaching reforms in China, learner autonomy and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have gained increasingly greater recognition. This essay probes into fostering students’ learning autonomy in CALL environment and add some practical solutions to the problems in its application as well as some suggestions for the development of learner autonomy in the authentic teaching practice.

KEYWORDS: Learner autonomy; Computer-Assisted language learning (CALL)

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is an age of information explosion, in which new knowledge far outpaces the renovation of textbooks. Therefore, modern college students ought to possess the ability of autonomous, continual and lifelong study. This is reflected in a series of nationwide reform of college English teaching. The new university English curriculum teaching requirements issued in 2007 stipulates that “All institutions of higher education should utilize the modern information technology to the full extent, adopt English teaching models based on the combination of computers and classrooms, and improve the traditional single teaching model which is focused on teacher-centered instruction. The new teaching models should be based on modern information technology, especially the Internet technology, and make English learning more personalized, individualized, and autonomous, without the limitations of time and place.”[1]

Following the 2007 College English Curriculum Requirements, the Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010—2020) persists in highlighting the informatization in Education. It proposes that by 2020, all schools in urban and rural areas shall be covered by a nationwide online educational service network, so as to promote modernization of teaching contents, pedagogy and methodology. Quality resources and advanced technology shall be put into full use, operational mechanisms and management modes shall be renovated, and available resources shall be integrated, so that a sophisticated, efficient and practical online education infrastructure can be built. Computer terminals shall be popularized, the building of e-campuses accelerated, and accesses to the Internet broadened.[2]

To meet these requirements, many institutions have followed the trend of multimedia and Internet-based teaching mode, which gives priority to promoting students’ autonomous learning ability while exploiting the Internet resources. Therefore, this essay aims to probe into fostering students’ learning autonomy in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environment and add some practical solutions to the problems in application of CALL as well as some suggestions for the development of learner autonomy in the authentic teaching practice.

2. LEARNER AUTONOMY

Over the last two decades, the concept of learner autonomy and independence has gained much momentum and vitality in English language teaching. In the case of language learning, learner autonomy entails the gradual development of a capacity for the independent and flexible use of the target language. Holec describes learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.”[3] David Little thinks that learner autonomy is “essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process...
and content of learning—a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action.”[4]

Whatever the definition is, there is a consensus that autonomous learning is the ability of learners to take charge of one’s learning, which means that students rather than their teacher are the center of teaching and learning. According to Reinders [5], “the role of the teacher as supporting scaffolding and creating room for the development of autonomy is very demanding and very important … Autonomy means empowering students, yet the classroom can be restrictive, so are the rules of chess or tennis, but the use of technology can take students outside of the structures of the classroom, and the students can take the outside world into the classroom.” Learners are expected to take more responsibilities for their own learning. Current ELT methodologies strongly urge universities to switch from the traditional teacher-centered classroom setting to a learner-centered and Internet-based one in order to reach the goal of autonomous learning.

3. APPLICATION OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

According to Reinders [6], since 1990s the focus of autonomous learning has experience the transition from in the classroom to out-of-the-classroom application.

3.1 Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

With the booming of the information technology, computer and Internet plays an increasingly crucial part in language learning and teaching. Recently, many scholars have called for the application of computer-assisted instruction to create more opportunities for self-study students, emphasizing the importance of applying computer-based technologies on autonomous learning. The unique and efficient Internet technology applied in CALL has renovated the traditional teaching methods and enabled personalized learning across time and border.

3.2 Learner Autonomy in CALL

The advent of information technology and its rapid growth poses a challenge for everyone: the set of skills and products are often replaced by new ones in just a few years. In this context, self-directed learning, in other words, autonomous learning is put further on the front stage. On one hand, the ability to present information within multimedia environment has become and irreversible trend, which is bound to persist and even accelerate. It becomes possible for learners to make meaningful learning decisions, such as what to learn, when to learn, whom to learn with, how to learn and how much time to spend on learning, etc, using the rich tools and resources made available by computer and Internet. On the other hand, CALL environment requires the students to be active learners in the whole process. “True language acquisition does not come from the technology itself; rather, it is from the active thinking and involvement in the activities that students do on the computer”. [7] Warschauer called network-based computer “the most recent innovation to be linked with the promotion of autonomy, when appropriately used, do show potential to promote student autonomy, increase classroom equality, and help students develop a critical learning perspective.”[8]

There are three types of learning modes for language learners in CALL environment: autonomous learning, cooperative learning among fixed groups, and cooperative learning among expanded groups. [9] The autonomous learning in CALL environment is a learning activity conducted by certain learning groups, aided by existing learning resources inside or outside school and designed to assist the teaching activities in the classroom and on the textbooks.

3.3 Problems in Implementation of CALL

Currently, the misunderstanding about CALL among educators and other applications of CALL have induced many problems in the actual implementation of CALL in China’s higher learning institutions.

Firstly, on administrative level, many teachers and teaching administrators have limited knowledge of CALL, only willing to recognize CALL as a complimentary tool to the traditional English teaching methods rather than acknowledging its leading role in the teaching process. For many teachers CALL is just a webpage or courseware designed to substitute blackboard. The traditional “what I say goes” phenomenon prevails. Because the courseware contains too much information and presentation, time is too limited in class; the students are experiencing more difficulty understanding and digesting the language knowledge in CALL classroom.

Besides, there are also problems of teacher’s competence. A significant proportion of teachers have not gained adequate knowledge on the advanced equipment and technology applied in CALL, not to mention that they can smoothly operate them in teaching practice.

3.4 Common Obstacles for Students’ Development of Learner Autonomy

As for developing students’ learner autonomy, students may encounter various setbacks as follows:

1) The lack of motivation and encouragement. Most of college students, if not passionate in English language, regard English only as a compulsory duty to pass the exams and obtain the qualifications for
graduation. They don’t always have specific goals regarding language learning. Therefore, when studying English on their own, they feel disoriented and don’t know where to begin. What’s more, language acquisition is a slow process, one that requires constant learning and practicing. Many students, after studying for a short period of time, find themselves no much better in language proficiency, feeling discouraged and ready to give up.

2) The inappropriate learning materials and strategies. It’s obvious that students can get access to a wide range of materials from the Internet. However, not all of the materials are suitable for them. Many of the materials are designed for native speakers, many of the words and context are strange for foreign language learners without adequate proficiency. Materials containing appropriate amount of new knowledge can induce learning, but too much strange information can inhibit learner’s learning by hurting confidence and being too time-consuming. Meanwhile, many learners are not flexible with their learning strategies. Online resources are various in forms, which require constant switch between different learning methods. One must constantly practice his or her learning skills to cope with the authentic language environment, but most of the students lack this kind of practice.

3) The constraints from teacher-centered classroom and achievement-oriented testing. Though China’s teaching reforms began some years ago, most of teaching classrooms are still dominated by the teacher. Our students are used to receiving knowledge rather than discovering knowledge, in this way, no autonomous and effective learning is taking place. Students gradually become passive learners. What’s more, our evaluation of the students is still based on test results, and these tests are all achievement-oriented.

4. SOLUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

First of all, it is quite necessary to arouse students’ intrinsic interests and decision to make autonomous learning while they are using Internet resources. It is a fact that many students bear no mindset of language learning when they browse the Internet. To some extent, Internet and computer is just a source of entertainment. Under these circumstances, no efficient learning is happening, not to mention learner autonomy. Therefore, more awareness should be implanted into students’ mind, which can be realized by more education on students’ learning strategies and more activities promoted by teachers to involve students into online learning, such as exchanging English emails, preparing for class presentation, doing online research, holding online forum, broadcasting autonomous learning ideas and strategies, sharing learning materials and communicating experiences, which also serves as a reminder for students to undertake learning activities in the CALL environment.

Second, it is important to provide students with special training on learner autonomy. As Heloc [10] said, “Learner autonomy is a process, not a product... One only works towards autonomy. Instant scaffolding and monitoring is necessary and crucial especially at the initial stage, so that the learners may not feel upset by learning alone or stray away from learning.” In the circumstance that the learners have no sufficient knowledge on the steps and goals of autonomous learning, it is not reasonable to expect any significant development of students’ learner autonomy.

Last but not least, teachers should give priority to the development of learner autonomy in CALL context. Teachers are helpful in many ways. They not only guide the students in material selection, goal-setting, strategies and evaluation, but also coordinate students’ autonomous study with classroom activities. What’s more, they constantly give students encouragement and support. However, to assist throughout students’ self-learning process is a long and tedious task, one that requires constant attention and allowance of more time and energy. Besides, college English teachers are often academically burdened, sometimes their extracurricular effort is not officially acknowledged, which also undermines teachers’ enthusiasm.

5. CONCLUSION

Our world requires that individuals be adaptive, responsive, and amenable to learning both tasks and processes. To foster students’ learner autonomy, it is advisable that learners have appropriate resources at their disposal and acquire the ability to take on responsibility. In a truly learner-centered resource center, it has to provide a rich and varied input with a choice between pedagogical materials including a variety of approaches (communicative, audio-lingual, etc) and a wide range of raw data in the form of audio recordings, videos and some hyperlinks.

In the CALL environment, computers offer the learners various kinds of data and resources. And Internet connectivity makes it possible for learners to communicate and get instant access to the updated resources. From this perspective, it is more convenient and efficient for the teaching and learning practices. However, problems occur in the process of computer-based teaching mode. The application of CALL requires a systematic training for teachers on the practice of teaching design based on CALL theories and also the utility of the hardware and software devices. More importantly,
during the implementation of CALL teaching mode, it is of high importance to drive CALL from traditional teaching methods and make clear that CALL is of central role in the entire teaching process. Related policies must be put into practice to provide guidelines and principles for the curricular design and evaluation. In the meantime, teachers are supposed to equip students with effective learning strategies, facilitating them to be autonomous and life-long learners.

REFERENCES